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Innovative data approaches for measuring progress on gender equality and women's empowerment

Chair's summary

1. On 16 March 2018, the Commission on the Status of Women held an interactive expert panel on the theme "Innovative data approaches for measuring progress on gender equality and women's empowerment". The meeting was chaired by Vice-Chair of the Commission (Kenya), Koki Muli Grignon. The panellists were: Head of Statistics and Information of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, Steve MacFeely; member of the Gender Statistics Working Group of the National Administrative Department of Statistics of Colombia, Jaime Sebastian Lobo Tovar; Deputy Director of the non-governmental organization IT for Change, Nandini Chami; Senior Manager for Africa of the World Wide Web Foundation, Nnenna Nwakanma; and co-chair of the Committee on Statistical Capacity-building of the International Statistical Institute, Irena Krizman. Contributions to the discussion included interventions from nine Member States and six civil society organizations.

2. Participants of the interactive expert panel identified ways in which innovative approaches could be used to close critical data gaps in measuring gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. They also identified the opportunities and challenges that arise from the use of non-traditional data sources, particularly big data, for monitoring the gender-responsive implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and highlighted priority areas for future actions.

Innovations in the collection, availability and use of gender statistics

3. Owing, on the one hand, to rapid advances in computing and greater demand for high-quality statistics, and, on the other hand to reduced budgets, alternative data sources such as big data are increasingly used by national statistical agencies. Governments, businesses and civil society organizations to improve the collection,

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reporting, analysis and dissemination of more timely and relevant gender statistics. This is reflected in the increasing use of non-traditional data sources, such as geospatial information, credit card transactions and records from mobile phone usage which can help to improve the understanding of key aspects of girls' and women's lives.

4. Steps are also increasingly being taken to address the limitations of using traditional survey and census data and to optimize data collection processes, especially through the use of satellite imagery, web scraping and administrative data. These developments create a need to institutionalize the use of non-traditional data sources across national statistical systems in order to improve the production of statistics and fill critical knowledge gaps in relation to certain aspects, such as violence against women and the situation of specific groups of women, including women and girls with disabilities, and indigenous and rural women and girls.

Opportunities and challenges of big data for addressing data gaps

5. Participants underscored the potential of big data to provide high-quality, timely and reliable data to complement official statistics, in an effort to better address data gaps relating to gender. Data derived from big data sources, such as from mobile phone records and Internet activity, in some instances are well suited to capturing detailed and timely information on key indicators concerning the well-being of women and girls that are not always apparent in conventional sources such as household surveys and administrative records. However, it was also emphasized that the use of non-traditional data sources was promising but should not be regarded as a substitute for high-quality statistics produced by national statistical systems.

6. Access to and the use of big data sources was also seen as an increasing challenge for national statistical offices. Issues concerning quality assurance, data ownership, privacy and representativeness were highlighted as key barriers to using big data to inform official statistics. The need to streamline legal and ethical standards in the development of statistical services that use non-traditional data sources, in order to better address privacy and data ownership issues, was also highlighted.

Strengthening data governance in the digital age

7. Participants underscored the need for existing data principles governing the production and use of statistics to be adapted in light of the increasing use of non-traditional data sources. Given the evolving data ecosystem, participants reaffirmed the need to abide by the established Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics governing the production and use of official statistics. Standard-setting initiatives, such as the European Union General Data Protection Regulation, the International Open Data Charter and the Cape Town Global Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data were highlighted as best practices for expanding existing data principles to govern the use of non-traditional data sources.

8. Participants emphasized that when strengthening data governance in the digital age in support of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, it was important to protect the human rights and fundamental freedoms of women and girls. That included in particular the right to privacy: individuals' access to their data should be regarded as an extension of the right of access to information, especially in priority areas like health care and education.

9. Participants stressed the need for proper data protection measures to be put in place in order to prevent data misuse or mishandling. Countries highlighted the fundamental role of the United Nations and other international or regional organizations in setting principles and standards to guide collective action around the safe use of big data for development.

Facilitating partnerships with data users and producers

10. Participants underscored the need for strategic partnerships among State and non-State actors to create an enabling environment for the integration and use of new and traditional sources of data. The need to strengthen collaboration among national statistical offices and public and private organizations, in order to facilitate greater access to big data sources and advance the potential of official statistics to inform policies, was also stressed. Creating an enabling environment for data interoperability, which would facilitate access, processing and understanding of different data sources, was critical.

Priorities to advance gender statistics

11. Participants emphasized the need to strengthen capacity-building, in order to allow for the modernization of national statistical systems to collect, produce and disseminate statistics and fill critical gender data gaps using both traditional and non-traditional data sources.

12. Participants highlighted the need for governance mechanisms to better harmonize data produced by government ministries, civil society organizations and research institutions with official statistics produced by national statistical offices.

13. Participants also stressed the importance of open access to data and information in the context of monitoring the Sustainable Development Goals.